

Account of Purley on Thames

Village Blacksmiths in Purley (c1594-1936)

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by Jean Debney Originally published in three parts in Purley Parish News

Introduction

In the past every village had a blacksmith to shoe and care for the horses as well as make and repair metal household and farm equipment. He worked closely with the cartwright supplying metal parts for waggons and with the wheelwright producing iron tyres for the wooden wheels. Blacksmithing was a highly skilled family trade and passed from father to son. The working hours were long and arduous for a poor return: many accounts were only settled annually and then sometimes in kind: e.g. the baker would supply bread, leading to a shortage of ready money. At least one of Purley's blacksmiths was in debt over the value of his estate.

By the end of the nineteenth century, their work as a farrier, or horse doctor diagnosing and treating ailments, had been taken over by trained veterinary surgeons. The twentieth century saw many changes in transport and industry as cars and tractors replaced the horse and, by the end of the Second World War, the roll of the village blacksmith had virtually disappeared. Today, in the twenty-first century, only a few travelling shoeing smiths remain who visit stables on request over a wide area while a vet deals with any medical problems.

The blacksmith's shop was usually at a cross-roads to catch passing trade. In the early 17th century, the site of our smithy is uncertain and may have been a copyhold property in Purley Parva. It is not marked on the map of 1786 for Purley Magna, but several parcels of land exchanged between Anthony Morris Storer, who purchased the manor in 1793, and Philip Lybbe Powys of Purley Parva may have included the smithy. It is listed as Major Storer's property and located on the tithe map (1840) standing at the SE corner of the junction of Long Lane with Reading Road (now traffic lights). The premises were sold in 1920 by the Purley Park Estate and demolished in 1936 for road widening.

1. Ralph Winbolt: died 1605

The first recorded blacksmith in Purley was Ralph Winbolt who died suddenly in the summer of 1605 leaving debts more than the value of his estate. In 1600 he was 30 years old, born in Brimpton, Berks (i.e. about 1570) and had lived in Theale for three years and then Purley for six.¹ About 1599 he held 10½ acres of copyhold land in the manor of Purley Parva, then held by Lord Norris,² and, the same year, married Marian MYLES at Englefield.

In October 1605, letters of administration were granted to Ralph's widow and Richard MILES of Bradfield (probably her relative). Among the probate documents is the inventory of his goods and chattles valued at over £23 in July that year, plus some accounts, submitted to the Archdeacon by Marion in April 1606. Her expenses included 7s for the funeral, 3s 4d for the mortuary to the Parson, their only cow worth 30s (£1.50) as a heriot to the Lord of Manor, the rent due at his death, over £2.5s legal expenses and more than over £28 in debts added up to less than the value of his estate.

Their house had three sparsely furnished rooms plus the shop containing an anvil, sledges (hammers) with other tools and weales and a grindstone. The rest of the house consisted of the hall where they lived and cooked their food, a kechen with some household pots, a spinning wheel, wool, fleeces and raw cloth (either Marion or both of them were probably outworkers for the Reading woollen cloth industry) and a loft with their bed and bedding and where they stored some bacon and cheese.

2. Thomas SIMMONS*: died 1643

The only information we have about this blacksmith is that he apparently died suddenly in 1643 without making a will and, on 15 July that year, his brother, Nicholas of Basildon, with Henry CORDREY also of Basildon acting as his bondsman, obtained Letters of Administration on Thomas's estate, with a Bond for £100, double the value of his estate, from the Archdeacon of Berkshire. There is no record of his burial as the parish registers were not maintained in Purley between 1640 and 1660, the Civil War and Commonwealth period.

3. William SYMONS: 1696 - 1756

William was baptised in Purley on 8 Feb 1695/6, son of William and Elizabeth. In 1699, his father renewed his copyhold lease in Purley Parva at 2/- [10p] annual quit rent in lieu of services, and named himself and his sons Richard and William as the first, second and third lives. The property consisted of 2 parcels of arable in Westwood Field (Tilehurst), 2 acres in Cockley Hole Field, 2 acres in Lewdham Field, and 2 lot acres of Meadow in West Doles, Theale Mead, 1½ acres in Kernhams (or Jourdans) Close (in Purley) and he could also graze 20 sheep, 2 cows and 2 bullocks on the common pasture of the manor. The previous tenants of this copyhold had been Joan Briston and Oliver Jorden.

In December 1727, William married Elizabeth Smallbone in Speen and their two sons and four daughters were baptised in Purley between 1728 and 1739.

In January 1755, he had become the first life in the copyhold property and, for £40, renewed the lease adding Richard and Mary Loader, children of Francis Loader, a yeoman farmer of Hall Place, Tilehurst, as second and third lives. It isn't known what connection, if any, there was between these two families and why William didn't name any of his own children. He died the following year and was buried in Purley in August.

6. Richard (or James) MILLARD: bc. 1758 - died 1833

Richard is first recorded as resident in Purley in the Court Leet records in 1791. He had married Rebecca COKER in Reading in 1785 and their only known daughter was baptised in Purley in 1793. In 1796-7 he was elected by the Court Leet, held each year at the Greyhound in Tidmarsh, to be Tithingman, or Assistant Constable for Purley. He was last listed in Purley in 1804 when he probably moved to Reading.

Because he had held a parish office, he was considered to be 'settled' in Purley and entitled to parish relief if necessary. Between 1826 and 1833, when he would have been 70, Richard and his wife received money each week from the Overseers of Purley (today we would call it an 'old age pension') which increased over from 4/- [20p] to 5/- [25½p] and finally 6/- [30p]. After his burial in Reading in 1833 aged 77, Rebecca's relief was reduced to 3/- [15p] a week. But, in March 1835, the new Poor Law Union system was introduced and one of their first acts was to stop the old woman's small pension leaving her to manage as best she could.

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6. James (Jemmy) SIMMONS: 1770-1838, Master Blacksmith

James was baptised (as 'Jemmy') in Purley on 2 Dec 1770, the youngest son of Richard and Sarah. As a young man, it seems that he left Purley for a while and returned in 1805 as a married man with three sons by his wife, Sarah, née Vickers. Six more sons and three daughters, a total of thirteen children, were baptised in Purley. Unfortunately Levi, the youngest, baptised in 1824, committed a crime and was languishing in Reading Gaol in March 1851.

Between 1805 and 1837, Jemmy was listed as an inhabitant of Purley at the annual Court Leet held in the Greyhound public house in Tidmarsh and was also recorded as a 'master blacksmith'. When his sons reached the age of 12, they too were listed. Between 1813 and 1815 he was the tithingman (deputy constable) for Purley. After he died in 1838, aged 67, his wife remarried a widower from Ropley, Hampshire.

7. John SIMMONDS: born 1817

John was the tenth child of James and Sarah above and the only son known to have followed in his father's footsteps as a master blacksmith. He too was listed in the Court Leet (between 1839 and 1847 when the records end) and elected parish constable in place of his father from 1839 to 1847. In 1841 he married Susannah Cordery from Sherfield Green in Purley and had three sons, the eldest of whom died aged 3. Neither of their other sons appear to have followed in their father's footsteps and, by 1855, the family had left Purley.

8. John COX (1826-1903)

John Cox, the fifth of the eleven children of William & Louisa (née Stevens) blacksmith, was born and grew up in Pangbourne where he was probably apprenticed to his father. A couple of years after John Simmonds had left Purley, he moved into the Forge with his wife, Caroline, and their two eldest children. Over the next eighteen years they had ten more children baptised in the parish church. Three daughters were married in St Michaels, Tilehurst and at least two sons moved to London where they married and had families. None of them apparently followed in their father's footsteps as a blacksmith.

Local directories and other records record John living in Purley until 1904 after which, there is a single unexplained entry in a directory of a blacksmith called Thomas Kerr in Purley in 1907.

9. John James KIRK: c1858-1924 - the last blacksmith in Purley

John was born about 1858 and raised in Woodcote, Oxfordshire where he may have been apprenticed as a blacksmith. After his marriage to Eliza, nine children were born in nearby South Stoke between 1881 and 1899. The family arrived in Purley in December 1904 and the five younger ones were admitted to Purley Village School, the youngest three later completed their education in Pangbourne Junior School.

Between 1915 and 1924 John appears to have gone into partnership with his sons and “John James Kirk & Sons”, blacksmiths of Purley, were listed in local directories.

In 1920, 1923, 1926 and 1927 the Purley Park Estate was put up for sale and the property was broken up. Among the plots listed in the auctioneer’s catalogues was a “good” blacksmith’s shop and a brick and tiled cottage at the corner of Long Lane and the Oxford Road. The cottage contained a living room, scullery and wash-house with water from a well, three bedrooms plus a large garden and was let to “J. KIRK” at 5s6d [27p] rent a week. By 1926-27 the site, which measured about 130 feet on the Oxford Road and about 260 feet in Long Lane, was advertised as being “admirably adapted for a motor garage, petrol station and other commercial purposes”.

After John James died in May 1924 two of his sons, Horace and Alfred, were listed in 1924 and 1925-6 respectively. According to Purley’s burial register John was buried in the “centre of three graves by the wall near the tool shed”. His wife, Eliza, survived him until a foggy week in early January 1933 when she died during an “epidemic of flu in the first fortnight”. But she wasn’t buried with her husband “because bones were found when digging there”.

Also buried in Purley is their eldest son, Charles, who died in 1951 in Spencers Wood aged 70 and his 61 year old wife, Ellen of Purley, who died in 1940.

The forge and cottage remained empty for some time and some of the village children would stop by on their way to and from school to drop stones in the well and listen to see how deep it was.

The final nail in the coffin, so to speak, of Purley’s village blacksmiths came after over 300 years when the County Council demolished the buildings in 1936 to widen the road junction, and later put in the traffic lights. Only one known undated and blurred newspaper photograph exists and was published with the demolition report.

Meanwhile, a new era was beginning and motor cars were, from at least 1935, served by the Purley Garage, built in the Reading Road and run by Thomas A. Stephenson. By 1939, Charles Walter Edwards, was listed as the motor engineer - but that is another story...

Footnote:

The main sources used in compiling this information were local trade directories, census returns, parish registers of Purley, Pangbourne and Tilehurst, Purley Park Sale Catalogues, Parish Newsletters, manorial and probate records, etc.

*Note: **

Despite similar surnames, no links have yet been established between Thomas SIMMONS (2) and William SYMONDS (3). The spelling of this surname varies in each entry so the main spelling recorded for each individual has been used.

Sources:

The Village Blacksmith, J BAILEY (Shire Publications Ltd, 1977)

1. Archdeacon of Berks, Act Books (Depositions) 1597-1601, Berkshire Record Office (BRO): D/A2.c40 p143-4.

2. Survey (c.1599) of land held in the manor of Purley Parva by Lord NORRIS and leased to James WINCH: Oxford Record Office: PL IV/4 (items 4 & 8).

3. Archdeacon of Berks, probate records, 1508-1857, BRO: Admon D/A1/221/1-89, also Inventory & Accounts.

Meanings

Heriot: Manorial death duty to the lord of the manor (un-named)

Mortuary: Church death duty due to the Master Randall WRIGHT, parson of Purley

Words in italics indicate the original spelling in a document.